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WORK OF THE HOUSEWIVES LEAGUE

BY MRS. JULIAN HEATH,

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Some two years ago, when we began to feel the high cost of living, we were told it was on account of the tariff and the increased output of gold. It was because the producer did not produce enough and the consumer consumed too much. National, international, state and municipal commissions and committees were formed to consider the causes. These committees and commissions submitted reports and suggested remedies for the alleviation of the consumer, but somehow, the housewife was not considered to be a factor in either producing or controlling conditions. It remained for woman herself to realize that after all, as the spender of the family income, it was she who must make the weekly budget fit the weekly income, and that she was a factor to be considered.

Nine-tenths of the income of our great middle class and three-quarters of those with smaller incomes are spent directly by the woman. The women of this country spend $90\frac{3}{4}$ per cent of the money. If the American woman has failed at any one point it has been to recognize her economic position as the spender of the family income. Marriage is a contract by which the man becomes the producer and the woman the dispenser. We have demanded that the man be trained to produce but we have not demanded that the woman be trained to spend, and yet it devolves upon her to so spend what the man produces that the family shall be properly fed, clothed, housed and educated to take their place in the world.

An announcement to a wedding usually brings the thought, if not the query, as to the man's ability to properly support the girl he is to wed. Rarely do we raise the question, can the girl properly spend the money the man produces? We may ask, is she a good housekeeper—and good housekeeping may mean anything from the making of a loaf of chocolate cake or a pan of fudge to presiding

graciously over the five o'clock tea table. It does not mean, has she been trained to properly spend what the man produces. Women are at last recognizing this and it was the high cost of living which brought about the recognition. May it not, therefore, be called a blessing in disguise?

The housewife has become class conscious, and with this class consciousness came the demand for organization and there has been a great uprising of women all over the land. The Housewives League has produced a new factor in the economic life, that is, the organized housewife. It is a factor that not only must be but is being reckoned with.

Briefly, what can the organized housewife do?

We have laws on our statute books made for the protection of the home, but these laws are not enforced. Take for instance, the use of false weights and measures, which is a larger factor in the cost of living than one might recognize. It was estimated in the State of Washington last year, that had there been no false weights and measures used in that state the people would have been saved the sum of \$1,000,000. A committee in California estimated that had there been no false weights and measures used in the United States the people would have been saved enough money to run the government.

The practice is universal, not only with the retailer but also with the wholesaler, the manufacturer and those who manufacture the containers. We have inspectors, and no doubt they are doing their duty, but the evil will never be wiped out until every consumer in the land recognizes her responsibility and demands honest weight and honest measure.

Look at our pure food laws. In 1906 and 1907 we were aghast at the conditions of food. We were shown how we were being not slowly but quickly poisoned and we demanded and obtained a pure food law. Is it a fact that at the present time we have no pure foods on the market? Not at all. The Department of Agriculture in a recent report stated that, during the years of 1910 and 1911 more than two hundred ways were found of cheating the public, and added, that the "fakers were exceptionally active." They then gave the long list of adulterants found in seized goods just the same as before, and all this in spite of the pure food law. Who is to blame? Those who purchase these impure foods and no one else. This is purely

a question of supply and demand. If no adulterated foods were bought none would be manufactured.

Look at the unsanitary condition of our food stores! The bakeries, the delicatessens, the grocery stores, the meat markets, in fact wherever food is sold and handled, not only is there the unsanitary condition of the store itself but there is the unsanitary handling of the food. We have laws on our statute books which pertain to the physical condition of these stores, but we have none which would say to the tradesman, you must not let the store cat sleep in the raisin box; or, to the baker, you must not let each customer handle the rolls or have the bread piled promiscuously on counters and floor. We have nothing there but the protest of the consumer and an individual protest means but little. Just as soon as it is known, however, that there is an organized protest, it does count.

The profession of housekeeping has been exploited as has no other profession. Exploited by the use of dishonest weights and measures, by the unsanitary condition of our food stores, by the manufacturers of impure foods and fake textiles, by the unsanitary condition of our commercialized home industries, the bakeries, the laundries, the canneries, and last, but by no means least, by the manipulation of food prices until the American home itself is in danger. Housewives have not realized this before because they have not been class conscious. All that, however, is changing, and the housewives are seeing these things from a different viewpoint, recognizing their individual responsibility and recognizing the power of concerted action.

Now as to prices: How few women heretofore have really known the market value of commodities which they purchase. Their husbands, brothers and sons have been trained for their function as producers and know the value of every commodity they buy that enters into their trade or profession. "They know the market." We go to market and ask, how much is butter? The reply is given 45 cents, to which we say, rather high, is it not? And we are told yes; there has been a shipwreck, a cyclone, an earthquake or something of this sort and the price has advanced.

Last year during the demand which we started for "storage eggs at a storage price," I went to a retail store and saw three crates of eggs marked respectively 30, 40 and 55 cents.

"Those 55 cent eggs," I said, "what are they?" To which the tradesman replied, "Fresh eggs."

"I know, but what kind of fresh eggs?" The reply still came, "Why, fresh eggs, madam."

I then said, "Are they western eggs or state eggs?"

The man began to look a little interested, and I then said, "As a matter of fact, are they not cold-storage eggs?" To which the reply came, "Yes, they are cold-storage eggs, but perfectly good."

I said, "Yes, but you know and I know the best cold-storage eggs should not sell for more than 30 cents."

He then said, "Are you a wholesale dealer, madam?" To which I replied, "No."

"Well you seem to know about it," he said, "and I will let you have them for 30 cents;" and out of the crate of eggs marked 55 cents I purchased a dozen for 30 cents.

"You seem to know," was the secret of the whole thing.

Our campaign of education on the storage egg and its price has been a great eye opener to the women of this land, and never again can the storage egg be sold at a fancy price. The women know that the best cold-storage eggs are about the only eggs obtainable during the winter months, and they will never again be fooled by the so-called "fresh egg" sold at a fancy price.

The women are learning the market and best of all the "market" is recognizing the housewife as a power and moreover as an adjuster. Every day brings letters from producers, wholesalers, retailers asking for our coöperation in affecting the market. Only last week a letter came from the Department of Agriculture saying, "Can you not do something to stimulate the onion market? The onion producers are in despair." I think that was a rather difficult situation. We could ask the housewives to increase the consumption of apples or eggs, but to ask that the housewives place on their tables onions three times a day would be asking a little too much. However, the fact remains we are recognized as a factor in affecting the market.

Every morning the national executive committee of the Housewives League knows the condition of the produce and food market. Every night we receive the confidential market sheets, and it is interesting to know that when the Housewives League has been agitating prices on a certain commodity that we are always quoted. The statement will be made,—the apple market is moving, the

Housewives League is asking for apples at 5 cents a quart, the egg market is active because of the increased consumption due to the agitation of the Housewives League. Once when butter was a little high we suggested that it might be well if the women used the butter substitutes or even their home-made jellies and jams and gravies, and that night the market sheet stated, the "butter market is firm but there has been a sentimental decline of 1 cent." This was most interesting. I did not know what the sentimental part really meant, but I did know that it meant that we had been a factor to be reckoned with that day.

The Housewives League is a movement rather than an organization. It is composed of individual members, group members and affiliated members. We are attempting not to multiply organizations but to get already established organizations to take up the work in their locality. State federations are coming into line. City federations have charge of the Housewives League work in their cities. Neighborhood work is being organized as far as possible because, don't you see, if all of the women in a certain neighborhood were thoroughly organized they could absolutely control conditions in that neighborhood.

After two years of active work I am proud to record the fact that there has never been one word of criticism in regard to the League or any lack of coöperation on the part of tradesmen and those representing industries. You see up to this time everything has been organized; the retailer, the wholesaler, the manufacturer, the producer, but the purchasing power in the hands of each housewife had not been organized and we therefore have come as an adjuster and are heartily welcomed by all. If there is any one thing that the Housewives League stands for it is a square deal for all and this I believe is fully recognized. A square deal for the producer, middleman, manufacturer and consumer.

The dues have been placed at the nominal sum of 10 cents per capita and this 10-cent due carries with it our Housewives League button which has already become a power throughout the land. Our Rhode Island state chairman wrote me the other day that she went into a market that was not fair in dealing with its customers and she heard the remark made: "There comes that confounded button again." Another member almost the same day told me that her tradesman said, he was "proud when anyone came to his

store wearing that button because it placed his store on the high plane where it belonged." You see these are merely different viewpoints.

The Housewives League records members in every state in the Union, and state organization is being effected as rapidly as possible. It is destined to become international. This newly awakened class consciousness of the housewife has changed the entire viewpoint of women toward housekeeping and of the public toward the housewife. Housewives are at last recognizing that they are a great factor in the economic life and have taken their right position.